

# White House Feels Waxman's Oversight Gaze

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For months, Rep. Henry A. Waxman, chairman of the House oversight committee, has been threatening, subpoenaing and just plain badgering Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice to come before his panel to answer questions about the run-up to the Iraq war, corruption and State Department contracting.

Today, Rice will finally appear. But Waxman (D-Calif.) has not spent the week on a victory lap. He has found time to produce evidence accusing State Department security contractor Blackwater Worldwide of tax evasion, to fire off a letter to Rice demanding information about alleged mismanagement of a \$1 billion contract to train Iraqi police, and to hold a hearing on uranium poisoning on Navajo land.

Waxman has become the Bush administration's worst nightmare: a Democrat in the majority with subpoena power and the inclination to overturn rocks. But in Waxman the White House also faces an indefatigable capital veteran — with a staff renowned for its depth and experience — who has been waiting for this for 14 years.

These days, the 16-term congressman is always ready with a hearing, a fresh crop of internal administration e-mails or a new explosive report. And he has more than two dozen investigations underway, on such issues as

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# House Oversight Chief Seems to Keep Eyes on Everything

WAXMAN, *From A1*

the politicization of the entire federal government, formaldehyde in Federal Emergency Management Agency trailers, global warming, and safety concerns about the diabetes drug Avandia.

"We have to let people know they have someone watching them after six years with no oversight at all," said Waxman, 68. "And we've got a lot of low-hanging fruit to pick."

Republicans have their share of complaints. They say that Waxman's staff cuts corners, plays "gotcha" with witnesses and committee Republicans, bypasses GOP staff members by interviewing witnesses rather than deposing them, and would rather investigate than legislate. But even some of them speak with grudging admiration.

"For the administration, and for a lot of others, people need to be careful now," said Rep. Thomas M. Davis III (Va.), the ranking Republican on the committee. "Someone is looking over their shoulder."

Republicans and Democrats say that Waxman has marshaled three ingredients from his staff — tenacity, experience and loyalty — to make it one of the brightest spots on the new Congress's otherwise mixed record. The number of Democratic staff members has doubled, to about 75, since the party took control. About 25 investigators make up the core of Waxman's team.

Philip M. Schiliro, his committee chief of staff and the strategic brains of the operation, has been with Waxman since 1982. The congressman's staff director, Phil Barnett, has been with him since 1989. Karen Nelson, the committee's health policy direc-

tor, has been with Waxman since 1978.

"The best way for Congress to work is if you have a leadership-driven program that the party is trying to push, but that has to be leavened by the knowledge that people have from spending 10 or 15 years on a committee," said House Appropriations Committee Chairman David R. Obey (D-Wis.). "Do you think the leadership alone could design everything he's been doing? The leadership knows what they want investigated, but Henry also has some fabulous years of expertise and experience that lets him do something that virtually nobody else in this body could do."

The committee's style can be brash. To depose witnesses, Democratic staff members must notify Republicans, explain exhaustive legal rights and release transcripts only by committee agreement, said David Marin, the Republican staff director. So Schiliro and company favor less formal interviews, knowing that the penalty for perjury can be just as stiff. Word is out among government contractors to demand depositions whenever possible when the oversight panel comes to call.

Committee rules also require the majority staff to send a memo to the minority three days in advance, detailing the subject of an upcoming hearing and the issues that will be raised. Marin said advance memos tend to be milquetoast previews. Supplemental memos, which may reach Republicans just hours before the curtain rises, deliver the goods on just what Waxman is about to spring. With no time to formulate a rebuttal, Republicans can only watch the show.

But what a show it has been, including

former CIA operative Valerie Plame Wilson's debut before the cameras to former defense secretary Donald H. Rumsfeld's return to the spotlight to answer what he knew about the "friendly fire" death of National Football League safety-turned-Army Ranger Pat Tillman.

When Blackwater employees opened fire on civilians in Baghdad last month, Waxman's committee seemed to produce an extensive report on the company in an instant. When pro wrestler Chris Benoit killed his wife and son, then himself, committee staff leaned on years of work on steroids in sports to immediately dive into the murky world of World Wrestling Entertainment.

Waxman has shown himself to be tireless. On a single day last month, he angrily questioned the slow pace of change at Walter Reed Army Medical Center, led Jewish House colleagues to denounce Rep. James P. Moran Jr. (D-Va.) for suggesting that Jewish Americans helped start the Iraq war, and weighed in on another aspect of his committee's ongoing investigation of State Department Inspector General Howard J. Krongard.

Marin said Waxman has been dealt a very strong hand: an unpopular administration, an unpopular war and carte blanche from his leadership to go wherever he wants. Waxman's staff has a knack for atmospherics, holding information in its back pocket until news events pique interest.

"They understand there's nothing more exciting than seeing an e-mail or a secret document that you weren't ever supposed to see," Marin said.

Some investigations come straight from the headlines. This week's examination of

the health effects of neglected uranium mines on the Navajo land was the result of a Los Angeles Times series. Others are the pet peeves of staff members. The committee's look into the Pentagon's manipulation of Tillman's death and the capture of then-Army Pvt. Jessica Lynch grew from Schiliro's own nagging questions.

But the real secret, Waxman said, is simply to follow investigations wherever they lead. When Republicans were in control of Congress, the committee began looking into the activities of felonious lobbyist Jack Abramoff, a probe that turned up e-mails that Bush administration officials sent via Republican National Committee accounts. When Democrats took over, Waxman pursued it further, producing evidence that administration officials as high as former presidential adviser Karl Rove had violated federal rules by using RNC e-mails to cover their tracks on official business, including the controversial firings of U.S. attorneys allegedly for political reasons.

As it turns out, thousands of RNC e-mails have disappeared, stoking still more investigations.

Waxman's fascination with government contracting led him to investigate the pricing on a contract between the General Services Administration and Sun Microsystems and a no-bid job, ultimately terminated, that GSA chief Lurita Alexis Doan had given to a longtime friend.

When committee aides asked the GSA for information about the contracts, they inadvertently received documents on a political briefing that a White House political aide had given to GSA political appointees after the 2006 elections. In subsequent inter-

views, multiple sources told committee investigators that, at the conclusion of the briefing, Doan asked what could be done to "help our candidates" in the next elections.

Now, that investigation has swelled, as committee staffers seek to catalogue all the political presentations and activities that White House political staff members marshaled in federal agencies in connection with the 2006 elections. (Doan has denied doing anything improper regarding the contracts, or inducing her employees to engage in political activity.)

Blackwater came to the committee's attention after four Blackwater employees were killed in Fallujah, Iraq, in 2004. After the 2006 elections, lawyers for those employees' families contacted incoming House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-Calif.), accusing the company of negligence and asking for a probe. But committee staff members were already on the case, looking at Blackwater contracting costs along with other large contractors in Iraq. On Feb. 7, the committee formally began investigating the performance of private military contractors.

All of those threads work to the Democrats' advantage in multiple ways, hitting the Bush administration, keeping the war front and center, and bolstering Democratic efforts to steal the issues of waste, fraud and abuse from the GOP.

"We want to be the party that is ferreting out waste and fraud," said House Democratic Caucus Chairman Rahm Emanuel (Ill.), "and Henry's committee is the point of the spear for us."

*Staff writer Elizabeth Williamson contributed to this report.*